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The Rise of Siraf: Long-Term Development of Trade Emporia within the Persian Gulf.

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Abstract

The esteemed historian of Indian Ocean trade, K.N. Chaudhuri wrote: "the rise of Siraf...is well attested, but curiously enough never properly explained" (1985: 48). While no pretence is made to being able to offer a full answer to this question, I hope to be able to set out the context in which the rise of Siraf occurred, which should in itself help to frame the question more clearly and provide some clues as to the nature and direction of events at this time. In fact, a partial answer to Chaudhuri's question has already been provided implicitly in an article on Sasanian maritime trade written by Whitehouse and Williamson (1973), which juxtaposes the evidence from Williamson's investigations at Bushehr and the excavations at Siraf. Elsewhere Williamson made an explicit case for the connection between the demise of the trade emporium at Bushehr in the 9th century and the subsequent dramatic expansion of Siraf during the same period 220km further down the Persian Gulf coast. What Williamson did not do however was to develop the point or consider its significance.

It is now widely acknowledged that the early 9th century was marked by significant changes in the scale of long-distance trade in the Indian Ocean, with ships setting out from the Persian Gulf and making direct voyages to and from the Far East for the first time in history. These voyages signify a significant change in mercantile behaviour and in the structure of Indian Ocean trade as a whole. Furthermore, these changes



were intimately bound up with the history of Siraf itself, which represented one of the main trade emporia within the Persian Gulf for which much of this trade was bound. The break from a previous pattern of long-distance trading, which mostly involved trade between the Persian Gulf and India or separate legs for goods coming from further east beyond this point, is significant, especially when it appears to have been marked by a shift in the focus of activities within the Persian Gulf itself.

Andrew Williamson's survey of the Bushehr peninsular carried out over a number of visits between 1969-71 proved conclusively that Bushehr had acted as a major centre of population during the Sasanian and very early Islamic periods, with sites spread across the peninsular and major concentrations at Rishahr and Halileh (Whitehouse & Williamson, 1973: fig. 4). The scale of this activity together with its location and certain important details indicating that Bushehr acted as a major port, make the argument that Williamson put forward linking Bushehr to the historical port of Rev Ardashir, virtually irrefutable. Rev Ardashir, it is known, was founded by Ardashir I as part of a deliberate policy to promote and dominate trade within the Persian Gulf and the port went on to become the major centre of Sasanian maritime activity. Williamson's survey of the peninsular has shown that the city reached its greatest extent and probably influence towards the end of the Sasanian period and into the Early Islamic period, between the 5th - 8th centuries, but that it fell into catastrophic decline during the first quarter of the 9th century (Williamson, 1971-72: 37). A more recent survey carried out in the winter of 2004 that deliberately set out to understand the wider relations between Bushehr and its immediate hinterland, has indicated, at a preliminary level at least, that it may not just have been the port cities of Bushehr that fell into decline, but actually large parts of the regional settlement system (Carter, Challis, Priestman & Tofighian, forthcoming). This dramatic shift in economic fortunes from Bushehr to Siraf, at the same

time as the structure of Indian Ocean trade was in transition, should in itself be able to tell us a great deal about the nature of the developments occurring at this time.

Carter, R.A, Challis, K., Priestman, S.M.N. & Tofighian, H. forthcoming: *The Bushehr Hinterland. Results of the First Season of the Iranian-British Archaeological Survey of Bushehr Province, November-December 2004.*

Chaudhuri, K.N. 1985: *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean. An Economic History from the Rise of Islam.* Munishiram Manoharlal: New Delhi.

Whitehouse, D. & Williamson, A.G. 1973: 'Sasanian maritime trade', *Iran*, 11: 29-49.

Williamson, A.G. 1971-72: 'Chapter 5. Rishahr and the development of trade from the 3rd to the 7th centuries A.D.'. In *The Maritime Cities of the Persian Gulf and their Commercial Role from the 5th Century to 1507.* Unpublished PhD: Ashmolean Museum Archive, Oxford.

The role of Siraf and the reasons for its existence cannot be understood in geographic or historic isolation. Clearly as a port city, it functioned as part of a bigger network of trade and its geographic position was fixed in relation to the other nodes within the contemporary trade network. Similarly, in a historical sense, the reasons for Siraf's rise and decline in importance over a period of about two hundred a fifty, three hundred years, was not arbitrary, it was determined by factors particular to that juncture of history within the Persian Gulf. At the same time,



because Siraf occupied a unique moment of history its particular function may well have been specific. My aim in this paper is to explore the conditions preceding the emergence of Siraf in order to attempt to explain how Siraf rose to importance and to consider what implications the rise of Siraf has for the historical changes occurring during this period.

The starting point for this particular enquiry into Siraf is the research that has been undertaken on the pottery from Andrew Williamson's survey of the Persian Gulf coast that he carried out between 1968 and 1971. Since October 2001 with generous support from the British Institute of Persian Studies, research has been carried out by the present author and Dr. Derek Kennet, at the University of Durham, on the substantial collection of pottery that Andrew Williamson exported to the United Kingdom, which forms the counterpart to the materials housed at the National Museum in Tehran. Andrew Williamson himself was prevented from bringing this work to publication by his tragic death in 1975 at the age of just thirty. What he succeeded in accomplishing in Iran was however unique. Over the space of just three years, and about eighteen months of fieldwork, he undertook a very large scale and rapid survey of most of the Persian Gulf coast of Iran, from Bushehr to Jask, as well as an inland survey through Fars in the area between

Bushehr, Shiraz and Sirjan and in Kerman from the Minab Delta, through most of the valley systems leading up towards Jiroft. Throughout the survey, Williamson focussed only on the remains from the Sasanian and Islamic eras, although for most of the survey he was accompanied by Martha Prickett, who made a record of the prehistoric sites that they encountered. The type of survey that Williamson undertook was by no means detailed and the nature of the information that he collected was basic; just small samples of pottery collected off the surface of sites. What the Collection does provide is the opportunity to look at ceramic distributions and site distributions over a very wide area. These can be used to build up generalised, but also very broad models of change across the region as a whole.

One of the important aspects that it has been possible to provide evidence for through the Williamson Collection is what appears to be a long and continuous sequence, involving successive major emporia within the Persian Gulf and a continuous migration of one major emporium to the next. This migration appears to start higher up within the Persian Gulf, and over a period of about one thousand eight hundred years or more, moves down towards its mouth. Siraf was one of these major emporia, which at one time dominated the flow of trade through the Persian Gulf. The events that mark the end of Siraf's period



of dominance are reasonably well known. The earthquake in 977 AD may well have substantially weakened the site, making it more vulnerable and susceptible to attack, though it is clear that the site continued to be occupied well beyond that date. Finally, in the early 11th century, the emerging power base centred on the Island of Kish, which had posed a constant threat throughout the waning period of Siraf, won out and most of the trade was shifted to this new port. Kish itself became a major emporium able to dominate trade within the Persian Gulf between the 11th - 13th centuries. At the same time, a new rival began to accrue power in the Minab Delta at the city of Old Hormuz. During the earlier 14th century, the city was moved out to Jarun Island, probably to make it less vulnerable to attack. Certainly there must have been a significant reason for the move as the island has no natural water sources and the added expenditure needed to maintain a settlement there must have been significant. Historical sources suggest that at about the same time that the city was re-founded, Hormuzi forces won a significant battle over the navy of Kish. Following these events, the port at Kish is thought to have fallen into rapid decline with most of the trade being shifted down into the mouth of the Persian Gulf.

Part of the argument for the rise in importance of Hormuz during the earlier 14th century, apart from the historical

information related to the battle, was based on the finds of early Chinese Blue and White Porcelain on the island and the understanding that this pottery came into circulation within the Persian Gulf during this period. The recent research on the substantial body of Chinese Blue and White pottery in the Williamson Collection suggests that 14th century material was still extremely rare even if it was arriving in the courts of Persia by this date. In fact, significant trade assemblages do not appear to start arriving in the area until the late 15th/early 16th centuries. This can be seen clearly by plotting the number of Chinese Blue and White sherds in the Collection by period.

In the light of this revaluation of Chinese Blue and White circulation based on survey assemblages rather than court standard material, the 14th century finds from Jarun Island, even if they were correctly identified, may not actually be significant in terms of major trading activity. An understanding of when this trade activity switched can be gained by looking at the substantial assemblages of other wares in the Williamson Collection from the two islands of Kish and Jarun. Looking at the total number of East Asian sherds by period from each island, one can see that in fact the major point of eclipse in terms of long-distance trade to the islands appears to occur sometime during the 15th or 16th centuries, perhaps as a result of



European interventions in Persian Gulf trade, rather than as a result of the victory that Hormuz claimed over Kish in the 14th century.

The sequence that has been presented from the rise of Siraf, to Kish, to Hormuz is undoubtedly over-simplified and there are likely to have been many factors involved in the evolution of the trade network within the Persian Gulf during the long period under consideration. In essence, however, there appears to be good evidence to suggest, both historically and archaeologically, that at any one time there was one major trade emporium situated on the northern shore of the Persian Gulf, that that emporium occupied an axial position within the Persian Gulf trade network and that over time as one centre fell into decline another rose to power. In addition there appears to be a trend, whereby these trade emporia shifted over time from higher up in the Gulf towards its mouth. This trend itself may well be related to wider developments in the structure of Indian Ocean trade, a point that will be returned to below.

Coming back to the origins of Siraf: it is clear that the port was part of a wider trade emporia system. Even in the earliest levels at the site, before the major architectural developments seen in the construction of the mosque or the houses in the deep

sounding in Trench A, substantial volumes of East Asian pottery were arriving at the site, mostly in the form of green glazed Dusun jars and painted stoneware Changsha bowls. These finds are amongst the earliest East Asian imports recovered within the Persian Gulf. In a detailed examination of the historical and archaeological evidence related to the origins of direct trading with East Asia, Williamson and Whitehouse concluded that such trade did not begin until the early Islamic period, despite some potential earlier references. If they were correct, then this phase at Siraf marks a significant change in the scale, direction and organisation of Indian Ocean trade. Recently a fortuitous discovery was made of a shipwreck off the island of Belitung in the western Java Sea off the coast of Indonesia, dated to 826AD or slightly later, built of wood from Africa and/or India, constructed following an Arab (or equally Persian) design and loaded with a cargo of 56,500 Changsha bowls stacked inside Dusun jars. Although it is difficult to prove, there is every reason to believe that this ship was bound for the Persian Gulf. If so it confirms what has already been described historically and is indicated from the archaeological evidence from Siraf; that direct voyages were being made by local merchants to China at this early date.

The available evidence points to a significant realignment of trade at the very end of the 8th or beginning of the 9th century,



however the emporia system was not itself new. In the same paper as that referred to above, Williamson and Whitehouse were able to present a powerful argument suggesting that long-distance maritime trade was already an important part of the economy and flourishing under the previous Sasanian administration. Williamson's detailed survey of the Bushehr peninsular over a number of successive visits was significant in the recognition of this point. From his survey he identified over 450 hectares of mounded occupation at Rishahr, another substantial urban scale site on the south of the peninsula at Halileh and Hazar Mardom and a more or less continuous scatter of settlements strung out across the peninsula between these two sites. In total Williamson may have recorded as many as many as 200 hundred archaeological sites across the peninsula, although only 89 of these are represented in Williamson's archives and the Ashmolean Museum's Collection. The site a Rishahr alone, was the largest site that Williamson identified for any period along the whole of the coastal stretch from Bushehr to Jask.

Although others had noted the richness of the archaeological remains in the Bushehr area before, Williamson was the first to recognise that the overwhelming majority of these sites were occupied during the Partho-Sasanian period. He was also the

first to make a detailed argument for the identification of these ruins with the major Sasanian port on the Persian Gulf, Rev Ardashir. Historical texts indicate that Rev Ardashir was the main trade emporium within the Persian Gulf during the period and that it maintained regular direct trade links with India from as early as the 3rd century. It was in this city that the seat of the metropolitan of the Nestorian Church was established, from where bishops were ordained throughout the main cities of southern Iran, Bahrain, Socotra, southern India and Sri Lanka. Williamson's identification of the site is not without controversy. Most scholars appear to agree on an etymological connection between the name Rev Ardashir and Rishahr, however there are two modern villages of this name: one in Arrajan and the other on the Bushehr peninsula. The former site was favoured by Ghirshman as the site of Rev Ardashir, based on a short aerial reconnaissance that he made of the area. Others have claimed that the site at Arrajan is actually comprised of little more than a fishing village. This cannot be said of the massive Sasanian period ruins at Rishahr on Bushehr. The scale of the site combined with details such as a large stone built pier linked conclusively to the Sasanian period and finds of Indian pottery of Sasanian date, make the identification of Rev Ardashir on Bushehr very persuasive.



In the winter of 2004, a five-week joint British-Iranian archaeological survey was undertaken of the Bushehr hinterland direct by Dr. Carter of the University of Durham and Mr Tofighian of the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research, with Hamed Zar'eh as the local representative of the Bushehr Cultural Heritage Organisation and Seth Priestman as ceramic finds advisor from the University of Durham. One of the aims of the survey during the initial season was to explore the potential for research into the agricultural hinterland to the Sasanian port cities on the Bushehr peninsular. During the Sasanian period, Bushehr clearly supported a substantial population, though the peninsula itself has no natural water supply and little available land with agricultural potential. The subsistence of the population is therefore likely to have depended to a large extent on local agricultural production. Bushehr is also one of the few places on the Iranian shore of the Persian Gulf with a substantial cultivable hinterland. It would therefore have been ideally situated to fulfil the demands both of a port and of a sustainable urban centre. The only recent internationally known research on the Bushehr hinterland is that by Donald Whitcomb, based on a short survey that he made of the area in 1973 and a study of aerial photographs of the area. One of the main discoveries of his research was the identification of a substantial canal taken off from the Dalaki-Rud, to the north of Borazjan and running

for over 40km across the Borozjan plane down to Shif. From Shif, he proposed that it was carried out on an aqueduct across the straight to the Bushehr peninsula, via Shif Island, where it would have been carried by pipes to the settlements of Rishahr and Halileh. One of the aims of the 2004 Bushehr Hinterland Survey was to examine the so-called 'Angali canal' to establish its existence on the ground and to look at settlement in relation to it. Prior to the investigation it seemed reasonable to assume that the Sasanian port cities of Rishahr and Halileh together represented a maritime centre within the Persian Gulf and regional centre supported by a rural hinterland with long-distance redistribute routes leading towards the major Sasanian centres in Inland Fars.

The first significant point that arose from the recent field survey was that the 'Angali canal' does not in fact appear to be a canal. Inspection at several points along its course revealed nothing but an entirely level plane. At the bend in the river where the canal was supposed to have been taken off, there is actually a modern pumping station providing water for a small irrigation channel. At the same point, there is also a sizable Sasanian site. Before pump technology, however, the water would have had to be lifted up about ten metres to reach the height of the surrounding plane and even if this had been done, the flow of the river



seemed too weak to support a 40km canal. At the sea end of the canal, at Shif, there is a small port, which is still in use. During the 17th - 19th centuries, when Bushehr acted as the main port within the Persian Gulf for the Dutch and English East India Companies, Shif provided the main route for boats carrying goods on and off the peninsula and was used in preference to the slower and more treacherous route across the mud flats that separate the peninsula. At Shif a series of low mounds were examined belonging to the 12th - 14th centuries, a period which saw minor reoccupation on Bushehr peninsula. Next to these there was also a larger single mound belonging to the Sasanian period. Between Shif and Bushehr, there is a wide stretch of sea deep enough at least for the large fishing boats that dock out off Shif Island today. It seems inconceivable that this stretch of water was ever crossed by an aqueduct. Instead, it seems far more likely that Shif acted as a ferry point throughout the major periods of occupation on the Bushehr peninsula. Taken together the evidence related to the linear feature identified by Whitcomb and seen clearly on recent satellite images, must be given a different interpretation.

Another of the significant 'discoveries' made during the recent Bushehr Hinterland Survey, was that at the end of the linear feature, which Dr. Carter interprets plausibly as a road, there is a

very large Hellenistic/Sasanian site of at least 300 hectares. This city is actually known to many Iranian archaeologists and has been one of the subjects of Mr. Yaghma'i and Dr. Sarfaraz' investigations for many years. Outside of Iran, there appears to be no knowledge of the site. The presence of this site, which has no name, historical or modern, certainly challenges any concept of the port cities of Bushehr as a regional centre provided for by its own rural hinterland. Clearly there were two large cities, which appear to have been intimately linked by a direct road leading between them. Bushehr probably acted primarily as a port and entrepôt, while the inland city lay within the heartland of the agricultural hinterland and close to many other Hellenistic and Sasanian sites that were recorded during the recent survey. What role this city played in coordinating the provision of subsistence commodities to Bushehr and the redistribution of goods from the port is not clear, however the relationship between Bushehr and its hinterland was clearly more complex than was originally envisaged.

The main dating evidence for both the inland city and the ruins on Bushehr, has been provided by the inspection of surface scatters of ceramics. During the 2004 Bushehr Hinterland Survey, a rapid inspection was made of most of the city to the north of Borazjan. The collections that were made indicated that

the ruins all fell within the Hellenistic and Sasanian periods, though the largest mounds roughly occupying the centre of the site, produced finds that related exclusively to the later half of the Sasanian period, roughly 6th - 8th centuries. On Bushehr, the evidence is slightly more problematic. Williamson only focussed on the Sasanian and later periods, so there are very few Hellenistic finds contained within the Williamson Collection. At the same time Williamson did mention that the ruins across the peninsula were mostly Partho-Sasanian in date and this does appear to be confirmed by the brief inspections that the author has been able to make at Hazar Mardom. By the later Sasanian period, settlement on the peninsula appears to have reached its peak. Williamson was able to show that a single late Sasanian type fossil, which he attributed to the 5th - 7th centuries, was distributed across the full extent of the 450 hectares of mounding at Rishahr and widely across the rest of the peninsula. This type, which is an Alkaline-Glazed Ware basin with lug handles, a light olive-green glaze and distinctive bifurcating rim, was dated by Williamson by its absence from 3rd - 4th century levels at Coche in Iraq and from the earliest levels at Siraf. More recently a significant number of sherds belonging to this form were recovered from the stratified and fully quantified sequence at Kush, where the 5th - 7th century dating has been reconfirmed.

Shortly after the apogee of the Bushehr ports, there is evidence for a major settlement collapse across the peninsula, probably during the 9th century. The study recently undertaken of the Williamson Collection proves this point conclusively. Looking at the number of settlements occupied by period, one can see a drop of over half the number of sites between the 6th - 9th to 9th - 11th centuries. The dating for these figures is again based on the ceramics collected from the sites. If one only counts those sites were more than 10% of the assemblage relates to the periods in question, then the drop in site numbers appears even more striking. Williamson himself recognised this trend and estimated that at Rishahr the settled area dropped from 450 hectares to just 20 during the 9th century. This pattern appears to be confirmed by the author's own brief inspection of Hazar Mardom and other collections inspected from Rishahr, which are devoid of common Abbasid period indicators, such as appliqué decorated Alkaline-Glazed Ware or the Samarra Horizon wares.

What caused the apparently sudden collapse of one of the major entrepôt within the Persian Gulf is difficult to tell, especially after what appears to have been a long and sustained period of growth, starting sometime within the Hellenistic period or earlier and continuing all the way through to the later Sasanian period. Interestingly, at the same time as the major settlement



and maritime centre of Bushehr fell into decline, the inland city north of Borozjan was also abandoned. If these two centres were intimately linked, as has been proposed, then it appears that it was not just the settlement on the peninsula that collapsed, but also the whole of the regional settlement system. Closely following these events, probably not earlier than the 9th century, there appears to have been a major reoccupation of the site of Tawwaj, several kilometres to the north of the abandoned Sasanian city. Tawwaj also appears to have been occupied in Hellenistic times, probably on a more limited scale, but there was no evidence relating to the Sasanian period. When activity on the site was resumed, it appears that it was across the whole site simultaneously. This corresponds with available historical information, which indicates that a planned city was laid down at the site after the Arab conquest. It seems probable that the abandonment of the Sasanian city and the reoccupation of Tawwaj was a linked event and it may well have been that a substantial part of the population from the Sasanian city moved to the new site. What seems less likely is that this event was linked to the Arab conquest, as the occupation of Tawwaj occurred some time later in a period contemporary with the pre-architectural horizon activities at Siraf.

As with the foundation of Tawwaj, the main explanation that has been given for the abandonment of Rishahr is that the city was sacked and destroyed during the Arab conquests. If this had occurred then it would have been at the height of the city's prosperity. More recently the processes involved in the spread of Islam to Persia have been viewed in a less destructive and dramatic way. In any case, the dating from Rishahr and other related sites, including the inland Sasanian city and Tawwaj, suggest that these major upheavals in the area may have occurred at least one and a half centuries after the spread of Islam and at a time when other significant changes were taking place within the Persian Gulf region. One of the important elements of this change was the growth of the new port city of Siraf, two hundred a fifty kilometres down the coast, at exactly the same time that the major ports on Bushehr were falling rapidly into decline. One of the explanations that has been given for the growth of Siraf is the events that were occurring in southern Iraq. In particular, revolt of the Zanj African minority in Basra, which caused large-scale disruptions to the area's trade. The events in Basra may well themselves have been symptomatic of bigger processes occurring in southern Iraq at the time, as shortly after from the 10th century, the whole region appears to have fallen into a pattern of significant economic decline. It seems likely that as at Siraf, one of the important functions of Bushehr would have been the transshipment of goods



between the main redistribution centres in southern Iraq and the deep draught shipping, which carried goods to and from destinations beyond the shores of the Persian Gulf. Clearly there were many factors involved in the changing structure of trade and economy within the Persian Gulf at this time. Central it seems may have been the break up of the long standing power base centred in southern Iraq and the growth of new types of mercantile activity within the Indian Ocean, driven at this time primarily by merchants from the Persian Gulf. The scope remains for a much more specific understanding of these changes. What seems apparent now is the fate of several large trade emporia within the Persian Gulf were affected and that the growth of Siraf can be seen as a direct consequence of these processes and specifically the decline of former major centre that had flourished throughout the Sasanian and early Islamic period at Bushehr. With this shift, one sees the beginning of a process of emporia migration, which resulted in the end in the main Persian Gulf port being situated at its mouth. Again there are many processes involved in these events, however they do seem to be symptomatic of the gradual trend towards a growing cross-continental trade within the Indian Ocean, which stands in contrast to the thriving inter-Persian Gulf trade that existed during the Sasanian and to a lesser extent earlier Islamic periods.